

## Contingency, Staff, Anxious Pedagogy—and Love

*Lee Skallerup Bessette*

My pedagogies have always been anxious, and not just because I have been diagnosed with anxiety, although living with an invisible disability is a part of it (Horstein 2017). As a student I lived through food insecurity, sexual harassment and stalking, and abuse, on top of studying in a second language. I have taught contingently for most of my career, as a non-US-citizen. I have primarily taught students who are defined in one way or another as nontraditional. I have had students who left young children with family to pursue their degrees, who lived in their cars, who had immediate family incarcerated, who are sole caretakers for their families, who struggled with addiction, who came back from war and are living with posttraumatic stress disorder, who are the only one in their family who can speak English, and the list goes on (Toor 2017).

My current area of research is on how affect impacts our work as educators generally and, more specifically, as what is loosely referred to as “faculty developers.” Anxiety is just one of those emotions we deal with as educators, both our own and our students’. Another emotion is love—not romantic love but the love we feel and extend to someone or something we care deeply about. I think those two emotions, anxiety and love, are closely related, as we feel the most anxiety around those things and people we love the most. We worry about the immediate and uncertain futures, not in the abstract but in the concrete as we attach it to something or someone we have a deep investment in seeing succeed.

*Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*  
Volume 19, Number 3 DOI 10.1215/15314200-7615502 © 2019 by Duke University Press

1           So many of us come to university with one thought in mind: education  
2 is going to save us. In the face of all the other anxieties, education is the hope.  
3 I knew what had to be overcome to even set foot in my classroom, let alone  
4 succeed. It's what Tressie McMillan Cottom (2014) has called the "education  
5 gospel," and we believed in it fiercely, however imperfectly. If I stayed in  
6 higher education, if I *keep* staying in higher education, it's because I still  
7 believe in this gospel. I naively cling to the belief that I can make a difference  
8 in students' lives, in the face of systemic and systematic obstacles thrust in  
9 our way.

10           I was struck recently when I read an essay by educator Kiese Laymon.  
11 As Laymon (2017: n. p.) writes, "I loved my job. I loved going to work and I  
12 understood the first week of school that it was impossible to teach any student  
13 you despised. A teacher's job was to responsibly love the students in front of  
14 them." I was so struck that, as I was trying to find the article again to write  
15 these remarks, I misremembered the quote and reversed it, instead searching  
16 for "you can't teach who you don't love."

17           In higher education, for a long time we believed instead that we  
18 couldn't teach *what* we didn't love. Who was sitting in front of us was immat-  
19 erial; it was *what* we taught and how we felt about it that mattered. And I  
20 think we see that in how we expressed our anxieties: around disciplinary  
21 boundaries, funding, the future of X, the creation of Y; and even when we talk  
22 about "students" as some sort of amorphous monolith that didn't understand  
23 or appreciate the greatness of what we were teaching. Here lies the traditional  
24 sources of anxiety for some faculty, often the ones who control the narrative  
25 around higher education.

26           To quote bell hooks (2003: 127):

27  
28 To speak of love in relation to teaching is already to engage a dialogue that is  
29 taboo. When we speak of love and teaching, the connections that matter most  
30 are the relationship between teacher and subject taught, and the teacher-student  
31 relationship. When as professors we care deeply about our subject matter, when  
32 we profess to love what we teach and the process of teaching, that declaration of  
33 emotional connection tends to be viewed favorably by administrators and colleagues.

34 Adjuncts, of course, turned that notion on its head and proved that you  
35 could teach what you didn't love if you in fact loved your students instead.  
36 Thrown in front of classes to teach a topic we were only tenuously connected  
37 to, insofar as we had enough graduate credit hours to satisfy accreditation  
38 requirements, we instead loved the students—not uniformly or evenly or  
39

1 perfectly, but as individuals within a system that we were all beginning to  
2 recognize as being oppressive and exploitative. Our anxieties were concerned  
3 not with disciplinary battles but instead with getting a job, paying bills, sur-  
4 vival, and then, hopefully, being able to thrive. I'll never forget the fear I felt  
5 when paperwork was delayed and delayed and delayed and I didn't get paid,  
6 didn't have health insurance, and was pregnant with my second child, with  
7 the first one (not yet two years old) at home with her dad. How would we eat?  
8 Was this child I was growing even okay? To those who immediately dismiss  
9 my story as bad planning, personal choice, or foolishness, I say, this is noth-  
10 ing I haven't heard before, from colleagues, from strangers on the Internet,  
11 from friends, from family, from a college president. Where is your empathy?  
12 Where is your sense of solidarity? How is your anxiety clouding your ability  
13 to empathize with someone else's?

14 We love students in the face of being told we are less-than, that we are  
15 expendable, that we are failures. In the face of holding multiple jobs to make  
16 ends meet. In the face of our lack of health insurance. In the face of delayed,  
17 forestalled, lost, missing paperwork and pay. I mean loving students respon-  
18 sibly, as Laymon does, defining love in the vein of bell hooks (2003: 131): as  
19 "a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and  
20 trust." We love in the face of all of these anxieties, in the face of our students  
21 anxieties, rooted in a deep empathy for their situations, not so dissimilar to  
22 our own.

23 It is impossible to teach any student you despise. You can't teach those  
24 whom you don't love. This epiphany impacts my work now as a faculty devel-  
25 oper even more acutely. Faculty developers are caught in the middle of anx-  
26 ious faculty, uncomfortable with their own positions within the academy, in  
27 relationship to their students, their professions, their institutions, and their  
28 deep-seated views of the hierarchical structures of academia that sees us less  
29 as a colleague or teacher and more as service staff. Can you learn from some-  
30 one you despise?

31 There are no easy answers to these questions, no universal solutions  
32 for these challenges. This is especially difficult because we are at our most  
33 vulnerable when seeking help, especially as experts, as authorities, in a sys-  
34 tem that punishes vulnerability. I'm still figuring out how to exist in such a  
35 space, productively, effectively, and sanely, so my practice is imperfect and  
36 evolving. I never sought to be a role model, nor did I ever think my approach  
37 might be anything beyond my own idiosyncratic way of navigating my per-  
38 sonal and professional realities. Professionalism (which I take to mean profes-  
39 sional detachment) was never going to work for me, and while admittedly this

1 overflow of affect has slowed my professional path, it is more of a reflection of  
2 a system that punishes such behaviors. There are other costs, too, where the  
3 toll it can and does take on my health is not negligible. And I suspect that,  
4 like me, most of us have been wounded in one way or another by the systems  
5 and structures of academia.

6 Still, my pedagogy (and my research) has always been one infused  
7 with hope, with love, with empathy, with generosity. As a faculty developer,  
8 I strive to recognize that the faculty member's anxiety is not my anxiety, and  
9 their misconceptions about my work are not my anxiety either. As a teacher,  
10 I try to remember my love for the students and try to make a better classroom  
11 learning environment for them. My love for my students comes from a place of  
12 compassion, not from a place of power. In fact, in all of my positions, my rela-  
13 tive power has been negligible, and while I could have confused and conflated  
14 wielding power over my students as "love," I instead used it as a shared space  
15 for empathy. I also remember my love for the institution of higher education.  
16 Above all, I listen. I remember that to change a culture takes numerous small  
17 moments of empathy and connection over time. I treat every interaction as  
18 an opportunity for change, to practice the kind of love hooks describes. It is  
19 hard work, but I try to model the type of love that I hope spreads in academia.  
20  
21

### 22 **Note**

23 I dedicate this article to Miranda Foster Merklein (see Terrell 2017), to Margaret Mary  
24 Vojtko (see Kovalik 2013), to Robert Ryan (see McNeill 2017), and to all the adjuncts and  
25 contingent faculty who literally gave their lives and lived much more anxious pedagogies  
26 than many of us can imagine. These are the three names I know and can speak, but there  
27 are countless others who suffer and (yes) die in silence, without health insurance, without  
28 financial security, without a voice.  
29  
30

### 31 **Works Cited**

- 32 Cottom, Tressie McMillan. 2014. "Reparations: What the Educations Gospel Cannot Fix."  
33 *Tressiemc.com* (blog), 22 May. [tressiemc.com/uncategorized/reparations-what-the-education-gospel-cannot-fix/](http://tressiemc.com/uncategorized/reparations-what-the-education-gospel-cannot-fix/).  
34 hooks, bell. 2003. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Routledge.  
35 Horstein, Gail A. 2017. "Why I Dread the Accommodations Talk." *Chronicle of Higher*  
36 *Education*, 26 March. [www.chronicle.com/article/Why-I-Dread-the-Accommodations](http://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-I-Dread-the-Accommodations-239571)  
37 */239571*.  
38  
39

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

Kovalik, Daniel. 2013. "Death of an Adjunct." *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, 18 September. [www.post-gazette.com/opinion/Op-Ed/2013/09/18/Death-of-an-adjunct/stories/201309180224](http://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/Op-Ed/2013/09/18/Death-of-an-adjunct/stories/201309180224).

Laymon, Kiese. 2017. "Teaching White Students Showed Me the Difference between Power and Privilege" *Buzzfeed News*, 28 August. [www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kieselaymon/teaching-white-students-showed-me-the-difference-between](http://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kieselaymon/teaching-white-students-showed-me-the-difference-between).

McNeill, Claire. 2017. "In Union Push at USF, Adjunct Professors Strive for More Respect and a Living Wage." *Tampa Bay Times*, 17 November. [www.tampabay.com/news/education/college/In-union-push-at-USF-adjunct-professors-strive-for-more-respect-and-a-living-wage\\_162644741](http://www.tampabay.com/news/education/college/In-union-push-at-USF-adjunct-professors-strive-for-more-respect-and-a-living-wage_162644741).

Terrell, Steve. 2017. "Writer Turned Teacher Became Voice for Educators." *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 10 November. [www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local\\_news/writer-turned-teacher-became-voice-for-educators/article\\_8646f100-8510-5939-ab1f-87fd7e8e3363.html](http://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/local_news/writer-turned-teacher-became-voice-for-educators/article_8646f100-8510-5939-ab1f-87fd7e8e3363.html).

Toor, Rachel. 2017. "What I Know about My Students." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3 December. [www.chronicle.com/article/What-I-Know-About-My-Students/241920/](http://www.chronicle.com/article/What-I-Know-About-My-Students/241920/).



1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39